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ABSTRACT

This module concentrates on descriptive writing as a means of training students to be more precise in their diction and to provide adequate detail. The module attempts to offer students in English classes learning experiences similar to the ones they might experience in shop classes. The module is set up for individualized instruction and includes many student-centered activities as a means of permitting the teacher to offer help. Included in this module are: the objectives of the program, content outline, suggested lesson plan order, worksheets and directions for paragraphs, worksheets and tests for details, materials for student evaluation, and transparency masters. (TS)

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WRITING DESCRIPTION

USING DETAILS

MODULE

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The Williamsport Area
Community College

Prepared for teachers of English
assigned vocational students
February, 1976

CS202 748

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PREFACE

The first module prepared for this series concentrated on writing expository paragraphs. As was stated in that module, expository writing involves skills applicable to many writing experiences: the writing of letters, memoranda, and essay tests.

To sharpen those skills, this module concentrates on descriptive writing as a means of training the student to be more precise in his diction and to provide adequate detail. This module can be introduced after the student has received instruction on paragraph construction and organization, as those competencies will be helpful for this next experience. However, because this writing experience has a different approach to pre-writing, those first competencies are not pre-requisities.

Like the first module, this one attempts to provide simultaneous activities so that the teacher is free to work with individual students on their writing. Also like the first, this module concentrates on the paragraph unit. The rationale for so doing is that the major principles of clear, correct writing can be taught by means of the paragraph unit. Moreover, the conference approach is facilitated when the teacher has shorter papers to deal with.

The spelling module can accompany this unit. Everyday Word Worksheets should be completed with words culled from the students' written work. Curricular Words Worksheets may come to a momentary halt depending upon the vocational program but should be renewed as students are introduced to new terminology in their shops.

If your school owns the SRA Contemporary Composition, a set of transparencies which deal with a wide variety of topics related to writing, Units III and IV in particular are appropriate adjuncts to this module. Some of the materials in this module are borrowed from that SRA series.

OBJECTIVES

Terminal Objective

The student will be able to write a descriptive paragraph of approximately 150 - 250 words in which he demonstrates an understanding of paragraph organization and an ability to include exact diction.

Enabling Objectives

The student will be able to select and limit a topic for treatment in a descriptive paragraph.

The student will be able to draft a list of approximately 25 details which focus directly on the physical aspects of the place he has chosen to describe.

The student will be able to define abstract, specific, and concrete as those terms relate to detail.

Given ten sentences containing abstract details, the student will be able to strengthen those sentences by using specific and/or concrete details with 80% success.

The student will evaluate his list and incorporate specific and concrete details.

The student will be able to order his list of details into main parts or subdivisions of his topic.

The student will be able to write the first draft of his paragraph, following the second pre-writing worksheet and will include introductory and concluding matter.

The student will be able to include signal words that set off the main parts and which lend coherence to the paragraph.

Given ten sentences, the student will be able to identify weak verb forms and replace them with more exact verbs.

The student will evaluate his verbs in his first draft and replace weak, listless verbs with more exact ones.

CONTENT OUTLINE

There are two concurrent instructional areas: the writing of the descriptive paragraph and the use of exact diction. The aspects of diction covered here have been restricted to just specific/concrete details and replacing weak verbs. The rationale for including only that material is that it is most basic to the writing experience. Other diction concerns -- euphemism, cliche, redundancy, etc. -- could come in a later unit.

The switching from composition to the work on details is designed to permit carry-over of the diction work to the students' paragraphs. That switching is set up in the Suggested Lesson Plan which follows. This outline lists chronology within the two major areas, writing the descriptive paragraph and including exact diction.

I. The Paragraph

- A. Selecting and limiting the topic
- B. Pre-writing
  - 1. Listing details
  - 2. Ordering details
- C. First draft
  - 1. Introduction, body, conclusion
  - 2. Signal words
- D. Final draft, Self-analysis check sheet

II. Details

- A. Abstract
- B. Specific
- C. Concrete
- D. Verbs
  - 1. <u>To be</u> forms
  - 2. Indistinct image

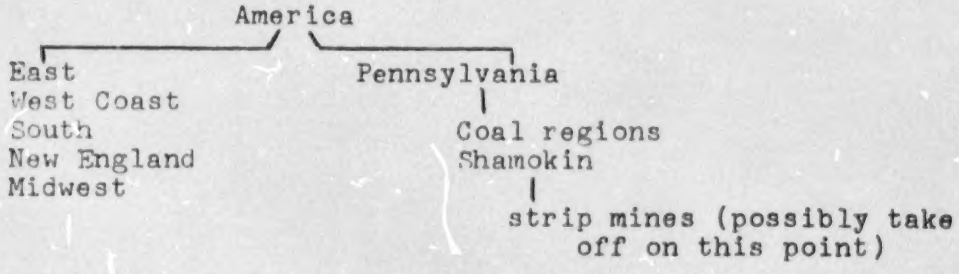
SUGGESTED LESSON PLAN ORDER

Introduce the writing task by reviewing the sample student paragraph. Ask the class to consider the questions about its structure. The structural devices, hopefully, will be repeated in the paragraphs the students will write. Don't leave that paragraph until you are reasonably sure that the concepts of focus, parts, order, and signal words are understood.

THEN:

Competency Level One:

1. Selecting and limiting topics for treatment within a paragraph unit
   a. Choose a place which is familiar, one visited several times
   b. Choose a place which is small enough for a close look. The sample paragraph does appear to violate this principle; however, the writer's focus was on the general seasonal cycle and its over-all effect on the Andes. Here you might repeat the classification process that can help get a subject area down to size:



   c. Choose a place that has, for some reason, become a strong memory and/or has unusual characteristics. For example - describing a room could work <u>if</u> there were some dominant trait. A student paper focused on the family parlor; the paper worked because the description noted the room's function as a family museum: a lamp, once kerosene now

electrified, belonging to a great-grandparent; a 400-day clock brought from Germany by a grandfather after World War I; a painting created by an uncle-artist; a dry sink belonging to a great-aunt; a ceramic plant stand designed by the mother, etc.

2. List details about the place
   a. Focus only on the place itself, noting physical details
   b. Avoid noting events that happened there; if the place is important only because of associated events, drop that place and try another.

Allow perhaps twenty minutes for students to work in class on this pre-writing; circulate and help lead them to potential topics. A date by which that list is to be complete can be set if out-of-class work is assigned. If not, let the list sit dormant while instruction on details is given.

Competency Level Two:

1. Writing specific and concrete details
   a. Introduce the terms - abstract, specific, concrete - transparency masters in the appendix facilitate this definition. Explain that written and spoken communications often involve primarily abstract or general language, a lazy, unimaginative habit most of us develop. "How was the movie?" -- "Interesting." The response offers no real information except that the viewer has a somewhat positive reaction. The purpose of interrupting the writing instruction and process here is to force that list of details to become more specific.

b. Worksheets 1 and 2 can be done in class or assigned. Review them in class, asking students to share their sentences.

2. Competency test on details

Return to paragraph pre-writing; complete and refine the list. Competency in writing exact details should be carried over to this list.

Competency Level Three:

1. Ordering the details

a. Explain that the list of details is a random collection that is now ready to be placed in a kind of informal outline. The pre-writing sheet 2 indicates the principles being applied. First, try to group related details and see if there is any observable plan. This work can be done on the list itself by numbering. At this point the teacher must be ready to help; often order is obvious although the student-writer cannot see any design.

b. Explain that the ordering of details into parts will facilitate the adding of signal words. To the right, further along, next, above, in the summer, in the fall, at night, in the morning, along the path -- these kinds of directional signals provide unity and help the reader's eye to see as the student-writer sees. A reminder here about the signals in the sample paragraph might clarify. Students need not worry at this point about including such phrases but a reminder that order will help with this component will force them to be moving in that direction.

2. Complete pre-writing 2; encourage students to work together.

Competency Level Four:

1. Writing the first draft

   a. Beginning: note the need for some kind of introductory matter. All that may be needed is an identification of the place by name in the first sentence or a generalization about the plee. "Our parlor represents three generations of the Smith family" was the beginning used by the student who wrote the paragraph alluded to earlier.

   b. Middle: tell the students that pre-Writing 2 forms the body of the paragraph. Expand those details into sentences.

   c. Ending: remind the student that some sort of final word is necessary. It may be unimaginative on this first paragraph -- "My tree house is really one of a kind" or it may be the spot to note the dominant impression as in the Andes sample. Don't force genius here; settle for a so-so ending.

2. Work in signal words: in some paragraphs students will have automatically signalled the parts; in others they will need some help. As you check progress on the first draft, be sure to force the students to notice that signals are or are not there.

When most of the class is finished or nearly finished with the first draft, and you have had time with each student to check his progress, introduce this final instruction.

Competency Level Five:

1. Replacing weak verbs

   a. Just as abstract details deaden writing so do weak, listless verbs. To be attacked are forms of <u>to be</u>: is, are, was, were, be, been. Explain that not always can those verbs be replaced, but that a writer should try to avoid their over-use. The

Volkswagon paragraph transparency with overlay illustrates the problem. Revised paragraph on second transparency illustrates the value of replacing the underlined verbs.

b. Another verb problem is similar to the use of abstract details: using verbs that give an indistinct image. For example, He walked slowly is less expressive than He inched along. The transparency with sentences containing this type of verb weakness should help students identify the problem.

2. The worksheet can be completed in or out of class and discussed. Then ask the students to return to their first draft, evaluate the verbs, strengthen them whenever possible.

After a final check of the first draft, students should be encouraged to act as proof readers for one another. The final draft should be written according to the specifications on format set by the teacher. The Self-Analysis Check Sheet should be completed and submitted with the final draft.

The evaluation techniques introduced in the first module are applicable here. Evaluate the paper according to the criteria listed on the Self-Analysis Check Sheet. Avoid "marking up" the paper with comments, proof-reading symbols, underlining, etc. A check mark by an error can remind the teacher to review that problem. During the conference with the student to review his work, discuss each error and explain why it needs correcting and show how to correct it. Remind the student that the grade earned encompasses only the criteria set on the Check Sheet and that, for this paragraph, the other errors have not been considered.

Additional descriptive paragraphs can be assigned. In all cases, insist on the re-writing; it need not be formalized with prepared sheets, but

you should ask for or check along the way, the pre-writing for each assignment. A paragraph translating some landscape painting to paper, a paragraph describing a person, a paragraph describing "My Dream Kitchen/Workshop/Bedroom -- any of these would reinforce the competencies covered in this unit.

THE ANDES MOUNTAINS

Along the winding paths of the Coya Country Club in the Andes Mountains, the view displays everlasting beauty. In the winter of every year, the skies are saturated with precipitative clouds. The snow accumulates over the winter months and blankets the rocky peaks and the massive international road system. Then the spring comes; the sky transforms to a deep blue color, full of sunshine. The heat from the sun radiates so intensely in places that the snow begins to melt, producing a massive system of streams and rivers. When summer returns, the snow disappears. The sky turns to a deeper blue color, and it is dotted with beautiful wild birds from the north. The peaks and cliffs tower high above the earth, easily visible from far away. The road system is uncovered, and people from all parts of the world are making use of it. Below, the green valleys absorb the water from the rivers and streams. Later, fall returns as do the gray clouds. The brooks are dry and useless now. Soon winter will be back, and the climatic cycle will be started once again.

Student paragraph

The paragraph, "The Andes Mountains", is an example of the kind of paragraph you will be asked to produce. To get the most help from it, look more closely at the way it is put together - its structure.

1. What is the paragraph about?

2. Underline all the physical details about the place. Do they all focus on the place itself?

3. Do you notice any order? What is it? Is the order proper?

4. On the basis of your answers to the questions #3, what are the main parts of the paragraph? What words signal those main parts?

When the student wrote this paragraph, he followed a writing plan. He did not just sit down and immediately put sentences together to form this paragraph. In composing your paragraph, follow the same steps he did by completing the worksheets that follow.

Paragraph Describing a Place Pre-writing 1

Name_____ Date _____

What place have you decided to write about?

Make a list of everything you can think of about that place. Focus on the physical aspects of the place. Don't bring in events that happened there or the people in the place.

Try this: put yourself in the place

what do you see nearby? far away?

what do you hear? smell?

light? dark? colors?

does the place change when the seasons change?

does the place change at different times of day?

Now just start listing those physical details; you don't need sentences. Just get the details out of your head, on to paper. Aim for 25-30. Ask your teacher to check your list when you finish it.

Paragraph Describing a Place Pre-writing 2

Name---------- Date----------

Your list is probably a random collection of details. Now you must put them into an order that will enable your readers to see the place as you see it.

describe by going from left to right or right to left
describe what is outside, moving in toward the middle
describe by moving from morning to night or season to season
describe by going from front to back
describe by going from least important to most important

The kind of order you choose will, of course, depend on the kind of details you put on the first worksheet and the kind of "picture" you want your readers to see.

This part of the pre-writing requires you now to order those details. Try to put related details together to form the main parts of the paragraph. Ask for help if you can't get started. This worksheet must also be checked when you finish it. You may have from 2 to 4 parts.

Topic----------

Part #1 is about----------

details:

Part #2 is about_____

details:

Part #3 is about_____

details:

Part #4 is about_____

details:

Paragraph Describing a Place First Draft

Now you are ready to put your paragraph together. Follow your pre-writing worksheet #2. Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, etc; concentrate on working your list items into sentences that will help your readers see what you see. When you finish, go over your work.

- Do you have words signaling the main parts as the sample paragraph did? If not, work them in.
- Does every detail focus on the place?
- Are the details specific rather than general?
- Check your paper for
  - spelling
  - punctuation
  - complete sentences

When you are finished with your first draft, ask your teacher to check it. After that check, you are ready to write your final draft.

Paragraph Describing a Place

Self-Analysis Check Sheet

Name_____ Topic _____

After writing your final draft, reading it to check for errors, asking another student to read it as a double check, rate your work on the scale below. 1 - low
4 - high

	4	3	2	1
1. Was your topic choice a wise one; that is, was the place you chose to describe the right "size" for a paragraph?				
2. Did you succeed in getting a picture on paper?				
3. Do the main parts stand out?				
4. Have you included signal words?				
5. Do all your details focus on the place itself and not on events that happened there or on the feelings you associate with the place?				
6. Are your details specific?				
7. Are your verbs exact; have you tried to avoid weak verb forms?				
8. Have you included a beginning and an ending?				

Writing Specific Details Worksheet

Name ---------- Date ----------

Develop these abstract statements by adding one or more specific details. You may keep the abstract and add the specific or restate the abstract in specific terms.

Example: The iron was hot. (abstract)

The iron was hot, about 220 degrees. (specific detail added)

The temperature of the iron was 220 degrees. (restatement in specific terms)

1. It rained hard.

---

2. Grandfather Wilson is a very old man.

---

3. I drove rapidly.

---

4. He lifted a great weight.

---

5. She is a heavy woman.

---

6. The day was warm.

---

7. He ate a big meal.

Writing Concrete Details Worksheet

Name_____ Date _____

The sentences that follow are abstract statements. Make them more exact by (1) adding a concrete detail to the abstract and letting the two stand side by side or (2) dropping the abstract altogether and replacing it with a concrete statement.

Example: The iron was hot. (abstract)

The iron was hot enough to hiss when it touched the damp handkerchief. (concrete detail added)

The iron hissed when it touched the damp handkerchief. (abstract hot replaced with concrete detail)

1. It rained hard.

---

2. Grandfather Wilson is a very old man.

---

3. I drove rapidly.

---

4. He lifted a great weight.

---

5. She is a heavy woman.

---

6. The day was warm.

---

7. He ate a big meal.

Writing Details Competency Test

Name ---------- Date ---------- Score ------

The sentences that follow are abstract statements. Make them more exact by using either specific or concrete details. As you did on the worksheet you may keep the abstract and add the more exact detail or you may drop the abstract altogether and replace it with a more exact statement.

1. We took a long walk.

---

2. Our basketball team had a successful season.

---

3. Tom is really fat.

---

4. He ran fast.

---

5. Yesterday's temperatures were high.

---

6. The music was loud.

---

7. Our cafeteria is too crowded.

---

8. It is a large room.

---

9. The garden is planted with lots of flowers.

---

10. My closet is a mess.

Allow ten points for each sentence; a score of 80 points is required to pass this competency.

Replacing Weak Verbs Worksheet

Name_____ Date _____

The sentences below contain weak verbs. Improve the sentences by substituting strong verbs. Write the sentences.

1. The driver drove his truck down the road.

_____

2. John walked into the room.

_____

3. There were girls screaming in the bleachers.

_____

4. Trees are on both sides of the driveway.

_____

5. Mary spoke quietly.

_____

6. Skiers skiied down the slopes.

_____

7. The flag is above.

_____

8. The stream goes around the cabin.

_____

9. An orange sun is in the western sky.

_____

10. There is a long driveway leading up to the house.

_____

Student Evaluation of the Paragraph - Detail Module

Although the writing you have begun in this unit will continue, the instruction is pretty much complete. Would you please respond to these questions about the unit: the teaching, the materials, the activities. You need not identify yourself. The purpose of the evaluation is to allow your teacher to get your reactions and improve the unit.

1. Was the teaching paced right for you? Was there enough time spent on
   a) selecting and limiting the topic _____ yes ____ no
   b) writing specific and concrete details _____ yes ____ no
   c) ordering details _____ yes ____ no
   d) putting the paragraph together _____ yes ____ no
   e) replacing weak verbs _____ yes ____ no

2. Did the sample student paragraph give you some idea about the kind of planning that needs to go into a paragraph? _____ yes ____ no

3. Did you find the pre-writing worksheets useful; did they help you with the actual writing of the paragraph? _____ yes ____ no

4. Did the transparencies used on the overhead projector help you understand the problems with details and with verbs? ____ yes ____ no

5. Did you find the workshop sessions worthwhile? _____ yes ____ no

6. Did you feel more confident about your work because of the chance for individual help from your teacher? _____ yes ____ no

7. Was it helpful for you to have your writing checked by another student? _____ yes ____ no

8. Did the Self-Analysis Check Sheet help you evaluate your own work? _____ yes ____ no

9. Did you understand the teacher's evaluation of your writing better by going over the paper than you would if the paper had been returned with the errors marked in red? _____ yes ____ no

10. What was the strongest feature of the unit? ----------

    ----

11. What was the weakest feature of the unit?----------

    ----

12. Would there be value to you of other units that use this same approach?

    _____ yes ____ no

DETAILS

Abstract - general statement
- Mr. Stuffy was fat.

Specific - exact statement
- Mr. Stuffy weighed 250 pounds.

Concrete - statement that gains exactness by a direct appeal to the senses
- Mr. Stuffy squeezed into the telephone booth.

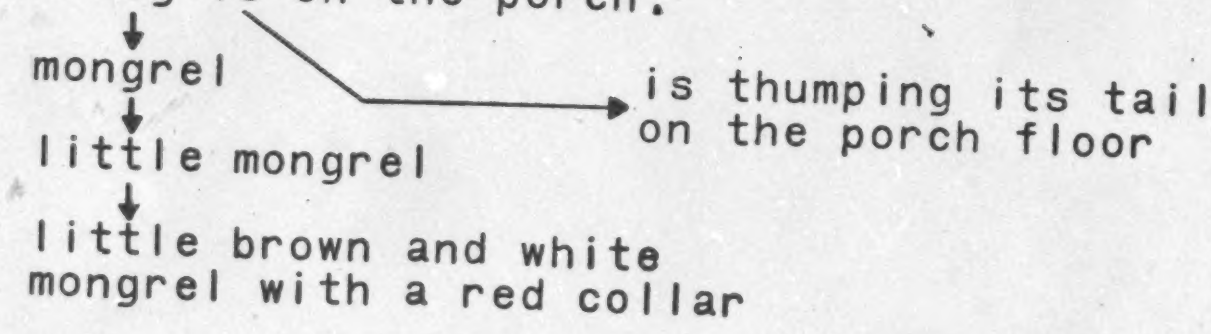
DETAILS

Writing sharp details is a simple process:

Be careful to choose exact words

Try to give your reader something to see

- A dog is on the porch.



- A little brown and white mongrel with a red collar is thumping its tail on the porch floor.

DETAILS

Identify the abstract details

Replace them with specific or concrete details

- Some birds were making noises on the windowsill.
- It was cold.
- He was tall.
- There was a heavy snowfall last night.

The Volkswagen is unexcelled for dependability. It is well-behaved under driving conditions in which other cars are kept off the road. Unlike conventional cars with their engine over the front wheels, the VW engine is in the back, which gives superior traction to the rear wheels. As a result, the VW can climb steep, slippery hills with ease or it can go with sureness through ice, snow, mud, and sand. Furthermore, other cars are easily outperformed by the VW even under the most extreme temperature conditions because there are no radiator problems in the VW. The VW engine is air-cooled; thus there are no leaks, rust, or anti-freeze problems peculiar to conventional cars. Anytime, summer or winter, day or night, the VW is ready to go anywhere.

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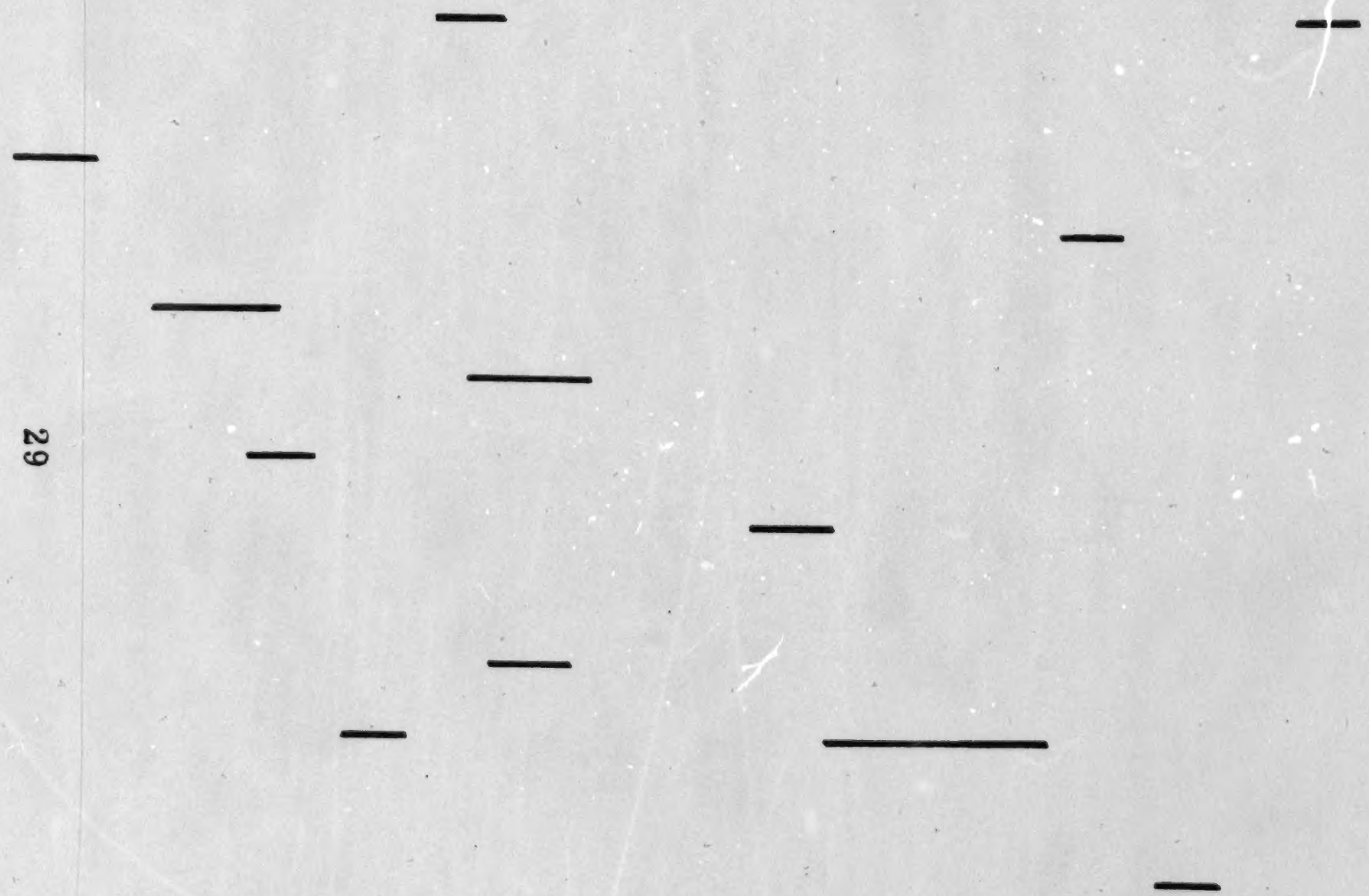

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Unexcelled for dependability, the Volkswagen behaves well under driving conditions that keep other cars off the road. Unlike conventional cars with their engines over the front wheels, the VW, with its engine's weight in the back of the car, allows the rear wheels superior traction. As a result, the VW climbs steep, slippery hills with ease or moves securely through ice, snow, mud, and sand. Further, the VW outperforms other cars even under the most extreme temperature conditions, because it needs no radiator. The air-cooled engine thus develops no leaks, rust, or anti-freeze problems peculiar to conventional cars. Anytime, summer or winter, day or night, the VW stands ready to go anywhere.

30

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REPLACING WEAK VERBS

Since the English language is rich in synonyms, a verb which expresses exactly what a writer means is easy to find.

For example,

Why say -

He called in a voice the volume of which indicated anger.

Even words here
boil down to
two -

He yelled.

REPLACING WEAK VERBS

How would you improve these sentences

- I proceeded on foot but in a great hurry to the fire.
- Lizards can be seen sunning themselves on the rocks.
- The road becomes wider at the final bend.
- He walked unevenly.
- The stream goes around the cabin.
- Exhausted after the day's strain, Joe sat down.